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THE DECORATIVE QUALITIES OF FLORENTINE
QUATTROCENTO RELIEF¹

I

As sculpture develops, two dominant conceptions of the art evolve, at times in accord, at times in direct opposition to each other. These are the naturalistic idea, which is the basis of representation, and the decorative idea, which is concerned with the composition or relationship of lines and masses. Representation aims at the realization of the human form, or in general at a certain similitude to nature; decoration involves the principles of order, unity, harmony, balance, and rhythm. Spirit and imagination, of course, cannot be left out of account. The two ideas, the representative and the decorative, give rise respectively to sculpture in the round and sculpture in relief, but not being incompatible may be fused in one object, either round or relief: the perfect balance of the two in any one work gives perfection of sculpture.

It is unnecessary to inquire here whether the first rude figures classified as art are pure geometric decoration, or, partly at least, symbolic attempt at representation, but it is well to remember,—what is indeed too easily ignored by art critics,—that a large portion of art in general and of sculpture in particular was made to decorate something. The decorative effect, therefore, whether primary purpose or merely artistic by-product, must be reckoned with, and as the significance of sculpture is, then, *ipso facto*, generally decorative, the axiom results that imitation of nature,—naturalism, realism, representation, whatever it may be called,—is not necessarily art and, in sculpture and elsewhere, only becomes art when balanced or dominated by the decorative spirit.

Sculpture, unlike architecture, seems to have been not so much an artistic evolution as a curiously alternating expression of the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the monuments cited in this article are in Florence.

two basic ideas, the representative and the decorative, sometimes one predominating, sometimes the other. Greek art achieved perfection in the idealistic representation of the human form. The gift of mediaeval art was perfection of decoration. In Renaissance sculpture classic and mediaeval elements mingle with the new realistic tendency of the time, each contributing its peculiar emphasis and flavor.

In the Proto-Renaissance sculpture of Italy the Pisani and a few other late mediaevalists stand out amid the general artistic chaos to give, in their groping for natural form, hint of a new era. There is ever increasing interest in realism,—sometimes at the expense of decorative values,—and transitional sculptors emerge, such as Nanni di Bartolo, Ciuffagni, and Nanni di Banco. Although from this latter group we get more successful attempt at form, only Nanni di Banco is effective to any appreciable degree in decorative expression, and that this is true is easy to understand. Nanni di Banco surpasses in distinction because with the power of crisp characterization, with restraint, poise, and striking nobility in his figures, he combines a clear grasp of the value of orderly design. For vigor, expressive simplicity, good space-filling, or for line, his compositions count as very satisfactory decorative units.¹

As the Renaissance enters, thus, in a tentative and gradual way and the great personalities appear at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, groping is replaced by sureness of touch and the development begins which is continuous to its efflorescent decline. Classic influence in the early Renaissance is inspirational rather than literally imitative, and classic and Renaissance work may therefore be clearly distinguished. Classic idealization stands opposed to Renaissance realism, classic perfection of the body to the spiritual significance stressed in Renaissance work; the classic type appears versus the Renaissance individual, classic impassivity versus portrayal of emotion. It is enlightening to trace how, among these general tendencies of sculpture, the fundamental principle of decoration is worked out in one place and quite forgotten in another. By Nanni di Banco, to begin with, it is by no means ignored.

¹ St. Luke, Cathedral, Florence, Venturi, *Storia dell' arte italiana*, VI, fig. 109. Predelle to Orsanmichele statues, Venturi, VI, figs. 116, 117.

II

If we should take from JACOPO DELLA QUERCIA¹ the Ilaria monument,² the whole decorative estimate of his work would be changed, for this tomb is, from the decorative point of view, one of the most uniquely inspired of all Renaissance achievements. Decorative qualities of an elementary kind are not lacking, however, in his other works sufficiently inspired also

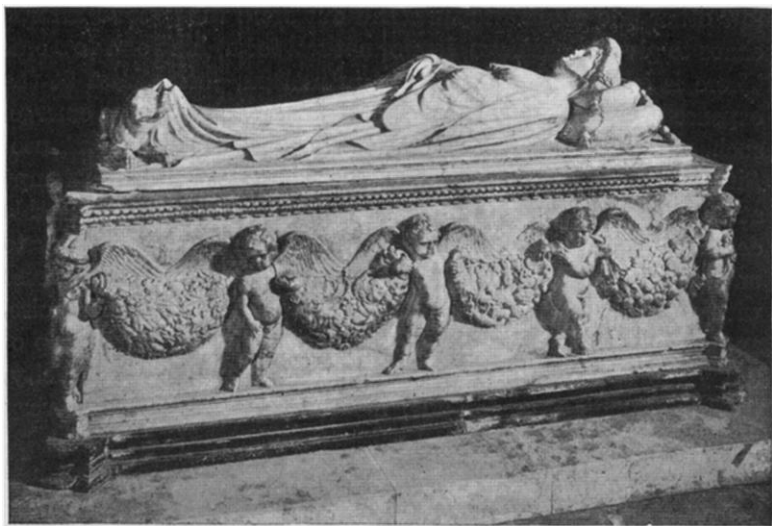


FIGURE 1.—TOMB OF ILARIA DEL CARRETTO BY JACOPO DELLA QUERCIA(?): LUCCA.

to be significant. The reliefs from the portal of San Petronio, Bologna, may be taken as typical.³ Broad, simple areas, well related to one another, reveal a good sense of balance, but as a rule not so much feeling for line as for mass, not so much thought for subtlety as for strength. The figures, simply and flatly treated, keep well to their background. On the one hand the flatness does not interfere with the realization of form and of

¹ Jacopo della Quercia, although not technically a Florentine, is closely allied in artistic aims to the contemporary trend of Florentine art, and is therefore included here with the great Florentine initiators of Italian Sculpture.

² Tomb of Ilaria del Carretto, Cathedral, Lucca. The time honored attribution of this monument to Della Quercia has recently been questioned rather convincingly without, however, supplying the name of any definite artist for the work. See Marquand, *A.J.A.* XIX, 1915, pp. 24 ff.

³ Venturi, VI, figs. 41-48.

vivid energy, and, on the other hand, by means of the flat treatment confusion of planes and disturbing violence of motion are avoided. The background is kept free from distracting detail, for elimination is with Jacopo a ruling motive, and accessories are reduced to the lowest terms. In the Vision of Zacharias,¹ one of the reliefs of the font in the Siena Baptistery, a dramatic scene is given focus and restraint by the device of a simple architectural arcade. Monumental restraint without accidental notes is typical of Jacopo's work. Jacopo's power lies, on the whole, in the combination of monumental quality, vitality of form and movement, and concentrated dramatic force. Jacopo's weakness appears in the treatment of drapery and of details in general. Feeling for line is sometimes lacking in the thick, flannel-like folds; sometimes again the drapery seems restless in line as if taking on emotional expression. The figures of the San Frediano altarpiece,² Lucca, show this less successful handling of drapery, while those from the Trenta tombs are more closely related to the Ilaria in the concentration of interest in line and design.

Jacopo, master of vital movement, is—if we leave with him the Ilaria monument—no less master of repose; a composer in mass, he can be at times no less a composer in line. In the tomb of Ilaria del Carretto (Fig. 1) we get the perfection of monumental repose, of line, and of decorative spirit. In the exquisite manipulation of the drapery there is sensitiveness of line and rhythm of line almost oriental. There is a lyric quality or grace of spirit which goes with grace of line. The flowers of the wreath which binds the head give their perfect and subtle accent of delicate pattern. The work is all so perfect that criticism becomes a mere pointing out of the obvious. Finally from the exquisite perfection of the effigy one turns, also with the satisfaction of one's decorative craving, to the exquisite frieze of garlands borne by putti, appearing now perchance for the first time in Renaissance sculpture, taken over appropriately from the genii of death on some ancient sarcophagus.

With Ghiberti we get the antithesis of Della Quercia in many ways. Ghiberti cannot think, like the Jacopo of the San Petronio façade, in terms of massive forms, of elemental emotions, of the dramatic. Ghiberti thinks "in the small" and can express himself only in terms of grace. Jacopo's preoccupation is with

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 35.

² Venturi, VI, fig. 34.

the dramatic moment, and decorative effect is merely the accompaniment, possibly accidental, while with Ghiberti, decoration is the supreme end and aim. Ghiberti's decoration is the fine and detailed ornamentation of a goldsmith rather than, like Jacopo's, sculptural composition in the largest sense.

The three sets of doorways of the Florentine baptistery illustrate progressively in their panels of biblical scenes the stages of growth from late mediaeval to the developed pictorial Renaissance relief of Ghiberti. The south doors, those of Andrea Pisano,¹ present relief typically mediaeval in arrangement and spirit. The panels of the east doors, the later set by Ghiberti,² show pictorial relief which is refined, elaborated, and entirely sophisticated in balance, composition, and spatial effects. Between these two series stands the earlier set by Ghiberti³ in the north doorway, still almost mediaeval in simplicity and balance, but at the same time showing in embryo the qualities of the great east doors: a love of elaboration and background accessories, of treating a subject in the anecdotal spirit. Compared with the sobriety and reserve of earlier relief, the north doors of Ghiberti, and still more the east doors, suggest another world entirely, a world of space and of third dimension. They suggest the painter and realist, and reveal Ghiberti in the midst of the new art current, far removed from the mediaeval Andrea. Ghiberti's reliefs, however, are reminiscent of the past, sometimes in the composition, sometimes in the Gothic grace and curve and backward bend of the figures. Antique influence is evident in a pervading feeling for the classic beauty of the human form: not anatomy, but the pure beauty of the nude engrossed Ghiberti, its beautiful lines and decorative import. Ghiberti, one realizes, makes no violent break with the past. He reconciles, in fact, all three tendencies, the classic, the mediaeval, and the contemporary, but is preëminently a decorator in everything, converting both story and pictorial elements into little decorative scenes, vivacious and lyrical, which are held together and unified by richly fanciful borders of floral and animal motifs arranged in orderly sequence.

The pictorial treatment of relief is Ghiberti's contribution, if contribution it be, to Renaissance sculpture. Others used it,

¹ Venturi, V, figs. 340, 341, 343, 344, 347, and others.

² Venturi, VI, figs. 82, 85. Michel, *Histoire de l'Art* III, 2, figs., 301-303.

³ Venturi, VI, figs. 69-72. Michel, III, 2, fig. 297.

to be sure, but not always with the same ease and finish. Ghiberti's taste for pictorial relief seems to be derived from his first artistic interest, which was painting rather than sculpture. Partly by chance, apparently, he drifted into sculpture, taking his painter's point of view with him, and he shows his connection with contemporary painters who were beginning to be absorbed in such artistic problems as perspective. Ghiberti translates the problem of perspective into bronze. The legitimacy of pictorial relief may be questioned. There seems to be a mutual incompatibility between landscape and bronze. Only by the magic touch of a Ghiberti can the soft lines of land and sky and trees lend themselves pliantly to so hard and polished a substance. Architecture, on the other hand, almost invariably a coherent and unifying factor in background composition, with its more formal, rigid, and upright lines, is well adapted to the medium of bronze. In the panel of the east doors which tells the story of Abraham,¹ the treatment of the branching trees and the fine architectural effect of the vertical trunks, with the same verticality charmingly echoed in the long graceful lines of the angels' robes, give immediate aesthetic pleasure, but do not permit one quite to forget the rather hard and shapeless rocks close at hand. The scenes with architectural settings, such as the story of the Queen of Sheba, are in general more convincing as decoration than the landscape scenes. As a whole the reliefs of Ghiberti's doors give both delightful sense of form and delightful sense of decoration. One enjoys the gentle, unerring, and unflinching grace, but is never entirely unconscious that the characteristic limitation of the art of sculpture has been naively ignored.

DONATELLO has at his command all of Jacopo's force and much of Ghiberti's grace. Donatello's is an art, above all else, of dramatic emotion; and sometimes with a quick touch of genius he makes it also an art of supreme decoration. Decoration, however, he often forgets, so obsessed does he become with the vivid presentation of his idea. From the decorative point of view Donatello's best work falls fairly early in his career when his realism and intensity of thought are held in check by his sense of beauty and design.

Donatello, always an innovator, is among the first of the Renaissance sculptors to make use of pictorial relief. The predella (Fig.2) to the statue of Saint George, Orsanmichele, is his earliest

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 85.

use of it and affords interesting contrast to the pictorial relief of his later years. There seems to be, in fact, a kind of progressive development in Donatello's use of the pictorial mode. This early predella presents the traditional "dragon and princess" tableau from the life of the saint. A loggia leading back gives the effect of depth, but the lines of the different planes are so quietly and so simply drawn that the background is free from confusion, serving merely to bind the composition well together. Though the lines are blurred from time and weather, the scene



FIGURE 2.—ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON BY DONATELLO: ORSANMICHELE, FLORENCE.

still appears fresh and naive in spirit, effective and unified in design. The relief of the font in the Siena Baptistry,¹ representing the Feast of Herod, and the relief of Salome at Lille are somewhat of the same simple type. In all three excessive depth of field is avoided, for the vista is limited by the architecture. A further stage of Donatello's interest in pictorial relief appears in the ceiling medallions² of the San Lorenzo sacristy (Fig. 3). These reliefs are decorative in general treatment of surface and cutting of areas, but are wholly unique as sculpture in the illusion they

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 141.

² Venturi, VI, figs. 162, 163.

create of air-filled space. In giving this happy effect of spaciousness,—a spaciousness which in no way suggests emptiness or mere void,—these medallions significantly anticipate the atmospheric perspective of Mantegna, Melozzo da Forlì, and some of the Umbrian painters. Late in life pictorial relief is not used by Donatello merely as a decorative expedient, but it becomes a direct means of bringing out the force of his theme. In the reliefs of the San Lorenzo pulpits,¹ confusion and overcrowding of scenes, rapid movement of the figures, even frenzy of motion,



FIGURE 3.—ST. JOHN ON PATMOS, MEDALLION BY DONATELLO: SAN LORENZO, FLORENCE.

all help to present with the greatest vividness the distracted intensity and emotion of the scenes of the Passion, but the pleasant suggestion of space and the feeling for line are lost and the work fails as decoration. In general, Donatello shows himself the sculptor of Christian emotion in contrast to antique repose; his San Lorenzo reliefs mark the culmination of his plastic ideal, infusion of thought with vibrant energy of the body. Powerfully expressive as they are, one misses the effective simplicity of his earlier relief, as well as the commanding force, found nota-

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 207.

bly in some of his other works, which goes with more classic restraint.

But the pictorial is by no means Donatello's only method of relief. The Madonnas,—in technique studies in line, in spirit studies in subtle human feeling,—show the happy simplification in treatment which makes them, decoratively and spiritually, among the most important of Donatello's creations. The Pazzi Madonna,¹ of the Berlin Museum, one of the few Donatello Madonnas of unquestioned attribution, presents the two figures of mother and Child with few lines, flat modeling, and without background accompaniments. Everything is subordinated to the primary idea of intensity of maternal affection as the mother presses the Child to her. The carelessness of line here and there seems irrelevant, compared to the clarity of the thought. There are a number of Madonnas, of less certain authorship, which, with some variation in technique and composition, follow this type. Among these may be noted an exquisite little panel recently acquired under the Quincy Shaw bequest by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.²

Both in the Madonna groups and in scenes of other subjects Donatello often makes effective and imaginative use of *stiacciato*, a type of relief so low that the figures seem flattened or as if crushed into the background. What we miss by this kind of technique in sharp, crisp line, we gain in suggestion of mystery from the very vagueness of the line as it melts or blurs away. Donatello's lines in this mode, in spite of their softness, are vibrant and significant. The relief of the Assumption (Fig. 4) on the Brancacci tomb in Sant' Angelo à Nilo, Naples, is an instance of Donatello's rare power of expressing by means of *stiacciato* great mystery, solemnity, and awe. The figures are full of nervous intensity, but shadowy and unreal; a space is left clear around the figure of the Virgin, giving her a kind of solemn aloofness which contributes to the imaginative effect. Another superb example of *stiacciato* relief is Donatello's panel in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, of Christ Delivering the Keys to Peter.³

It remains to speak of the essentially decorative motif, the putto or cherub, suggested directly by the antique and used by

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 148.

² *Art in America*, VI, 1918, fig. 2, opp. page 230.

³ Venturi, VI, fig. 147.

Donatello with distinction and charm; Donatello is among the first of Renaissance sculptors thoroughly to understand its decorative possibilities. The putto, romping and mischievous, sometimes with wings, sometimes without, neither of heaven nor of earth, belonging perhaps to a sort of between-world, is one of Donatello's most original departures as applied to impressive ecclesiastical monuments. On the open air pulpit at Prato¹ this rollicking imp appears in the full charm of Donatello's best work, but the most appealing of all his putti are no doubt those



FIGURE 4.—ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN BY DONATELLO: NAPLES.

of the cantoria,² now in the Cathedral Museum, Florence. Here across the frieze they make a rhythm of frenzied movement like that of classic bacchantae. There is rhythm everywhere, not only in the rapid, ecstatic movement, but in the lines of the young, half-nude forms, in the turn of the heads, in the swing of the clinging drapery. One of the incidental charms of the frieze is the mosaic background of *opus tessalatum*, with its delightful vibrating quality. The frieze as a whole is one of the finest decorative inspirations from Donatello's hand; the realistic and

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 155.

² Venturi, VI, figs. 156, 157.

emotional elements, so aggressive in much of Donatello's work, are here held in control by the decorative spirit.

Of LUCA DELLA ROBBIA, the third dominating personality of the early Florentine Quattrocento, Michel¹ says in effect: His genius is a matter of tenderness, simplicity, sane realism, and accessible charm. This is a true characterization, but the right emphasis must be kept, for Luca's charm is so "accessible" that it is easy to miss that which really makes him most worth while and which gives his work its decorative value or significance. The almost unfailing accompaniment of the tenderness and simplicity, that which, in fact, saves these qualities from the dangers of sentimentality and obviousness, is Luca's splendid genius for composition and line in combination with his rare sanity and poise. These essential traits permit him to take his place with his great contemporaries. He was a few years younger than either Ghiberti or Donatello, and his actual apprenticeship is uncertain, but the proximity to these older men may not have been without influence on Luca's general artistic understanding.

Luca's first incontestible work is the Singing Gallery,² made for the Cathedral. As it stands now close to Donatello's cantoria in the Cathedral Museum, and as it is similar in motif and very close in date, comparison of the two is inevitable. The swinging, rhythmic motion of Donatello's figures has been noted. In the frieze of Luca, antique influence is more apparent than in Donatello's, appearing in the drapery, in the laurel-bound heads, in the isocephalic composition. Luca's feeling for line is more sensitive and more classic than Donatello's, his feeling for arrangement and balance of masses more true, his sense of architectural decoration more sure. Luca's groups, separated by the upright dividing lines of pilasters, are composed within definite architectural panels, and each group becomes, thus, complete in itself, but finely subordinated to the decorative scheme of the whole. These differences aside, however, the real contrast which is very striking lies in the pervading spirit of the two reliefs; Luca's wingless boys are sane, contented, and happy, but with none of the mad lyric possession and whirl of Donatello's winged and temperamental putti. Perhaps the wings may be taken as the symbol of the difference between the two, and as that which puts them in different worlds, the symbol of temperament. These

¹ A. Michel, IV, 1, p. 72.

² Venturi, VI, figs. 363-369.

figures of Luca are full of reality, but have none of the super-vitality of Donatello's elf-children from an unknown world; Luca's are simply "the apotheosis of happy, Tuscan childhood."

Luca's power of direct, logical composition is illustrated in a number of other works. The panels of the bronze doors¹ of the Cathedral sacristy, Florence, show simple, balanced arrangement of figure, and show also Luca's feeling for grace of line, and his habitual mingling of tenderness and unaffected nobility. When Luca is direct, naïve, and unaffected, he is expressive and delightful. It is when he attempts the dramatic that he misses not only dramatic effect, but fails also in decorative judgment. Fra Angelico is, in a way, the analogy in painting; neither Fra Angelico nor Luca can represent dramatic crisis. The lunettes of the Resurrection and the Ascension,² over the Sacristy doors, as well as the relief of the Crucifixion at Impruneta, betray in the monotonous figures and mannered faces Luca's dramatic limitation. Devotional spirit is present, but not the decorative; Luca's characteristic excellence, the combination of spiritual dignity and decorative grace seems here to be wanting.

Although not an innovator in glazed terra-cotta, Luca brought that medium to perfection and popularity, giving it a vogue which lasted for the next hundred years. After his first timid, experimental and not altogether successful use of it in the tabernacle at Peretola, Luca used it freely and charmingly. He employed it for the lunettes above mentioned, for altar-pieces and tabernacles innumerable, for the medallions of Virtues³ in the chapel of the Portogallo tomb in San Miniato, for the Arms of the Guilds on Orsanmichele, and for delightful floral borders everywhere, even for the bordering frame of the solemn Federighi tomb⁴ in Santa Trinità. But Luca's most important application of glazed terra-cotta is to the Madonna compositions which make varying degrees of spiritual and decorative appeal. In studying these Madonnas, whether those of the more human and intimate type, such as the Madonna of San Pierino⁵ in the Bargello, or those of the more formal type, as the

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 382. Michel, III, 2, Pl. VIII.

² Venturi, VI, fig. 376.

³ Michel, IV, 1, fig. 61.

⁴ Venturi, VI, fig. 384.

⁵ Venturi, VI, fig. 379.

Frescobaldi Madonna,¹ Berlin, or the Madonna of the Rose Garden² (Bargello), all with their tenderness, simplicity, and accessible charm, one is reminded that Luca was no mere ornamentor in glazed terra-cotta, but that he had the usual sculptural training and apprenticeship of the time in different mediums. He lived in the contemporary current of artistic development just as Ghiberti and Donatello did, and his feeling for form is almost, his feeling for line quite as certain as theirs.



FIGURE 5.—ANGELS BY LUCA DELLA ROBBI: IMPRUNETA.

One can best leave the theme of Luca's charm, perhaps, by speaking of one of his favorite and most alluring decorative motifs, the figure of a youthful angel, used singly, in pairs, or in balanced groups. Direct descendant of the classic victory, by way of mediaeval ivory or other vehicle, this motif is taken over by the sculptors of the early Renaissance and finds in Luca's hand facile and delightful expression, whether it appears as wreath-bearer, or candle-bearer, whether it assists at Adorations, or modestly and cheerfully upholds Church Fathers at their

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 385.

² Venturi, VI, fig. 386.

work. Two of the most captivating of these angel groups are found in symmetrical balance on the predella to the Altar of the Holy Cross at Impruneta (Fig. 5). Always gracious and gentle, these little angel figures exemplify the principle constantly recurring in Luca's work, that grace of spirit and grace of line are quite inseparable companions: they make the charm entirely accessible. In much of the work of Luca's nephew, Andrea, and of his workshop, this accessibility of charm becomes mere obviousness; in the work of Luca the two terms are in no way synonymous.

The secret of aesthetic appeal in the work of AGOSTINO DI DUCCIO is far from obvious, for he too often fails in conception of form and in grasp of the essential coöperation between form and decoration. Nevertheless, for decorative idea he stands out unique among his contemporaries of Quattrocento art, apart from the contemporary current or development, with no immediate artistic progenitors, with no artistic descendants. Up to our time a victim of Vasari's invention or delusion, Duccio has only within recent years been extricated from oblivion by modern research and criticism, and rehabilitated with the artistic personality which belongs to him. Though a Florentine by birth, his work is chiefly associated with Modena, Perugia, and Rimini.¹

As has been implied, Agostino fits into no group, but he is supposed to receive influence from various sources. The reputed influence of Donatello, however, is not easy to trace. Both are linealists, but Agostino's sharp, crisp line, which makes a clear-cut pattern, is wholly unlike the vague, blurred line of Donatello's *stacciato*. This is not their only vital difference. Agostino, in direct contrast to Donatello, pays little heed to the careful treatment of the human form. Finally, Donatello's Christian ideal and Agostino's pagan feeling stand strongly opposed. From Leon Battista Alberti, Agostino is alleged to receive his peculiar type of drapery, of hair, of melancholy face which is often slightly distorted in pose and curiously eerie in expression. But the real influence coming to Agostino, whether by way of Alberti or not, is the Neo-Attic which appears in the diaphanous drapery, sometimes swirling and agitated, sometimes clinging in

¹ For illustrations of Perugian work see Venturi, VI, figs. 252-257, and Michel, III, 2, fig. 278, IV, 1, fig. 65. For work at Rimini, see Venturi, VI, figs. 249, 250, Michel, IV, 1, fig. 66.

thin, narrow folds. These rhythmically billowing garments tempt comparison with the fluttering robes of some ancient, wind-blown Nike. The antique strain, indeed, is pervasive in all Agostino's work, appearing, however, not in devotion to beauty of form, as with Ghiberti, but amazingly in the pagan spirit. Agostino's paganism, it may be pointed out, is not convincing as genuinely classic in feeling, but rather it seems to be



FIGURE 6.—ARCHANGEL MICHAEL BY AGOSTINO DI DUCCIO: SAN BERNARDINO, PERUGIA.

a Renaissance translation of the classic according to the understanding of the day. Thus the theme may be Franciscan Virtues, but what he really brings before us are irresponsible pagan nymphs; one feels this irresponsibility quite as readily in the Christian Virtues and angels of the San Bernardino façade, Perugia, as in the musical putti and mythical characters of Sigismondo Malatesta's pagan temple at Rimini. The peculiar note of irresponsibility belongs to a certain phase of the Renaissance

rather than to a typically classic ideal. Agostino draws from the source of his inspiration, whatever it may be, with his own capricious and inventive fancy.

Agostino di Duccio's genius one may safely say is purely decorative, and his work is largely decoration in the sense of surface pattern. When he attempts narrative, as in the scenes from the life of San Bernardino, in Perugia, he is helpless; he is much less helpless to be sure in his earlier reliefs, in Modena Cathedral,



FIGURE 7.—CHASTITY AND MUSICAL ANGELS BY AGOSTINO DI DUCCIO: SAN BERNARDINO, PERUGIA.

which relate episodes from the life of San Gemignano. It is, however, as composer or filler of space that Agostino is at times unsurpassed, although even in composition he sometimes misses a gratifying result, for he relies too obviously on rhythmical drapery for decorative effect. It is evident that the artist is more concerned with design than with representation, but it is equally evident that he succeeds best with design when he gives most careful thought to the representation of his forms. Among his most careful and successful creations are several reliefs of the

Perugian façade: the Archangel Michael (Fig. 6), the Christian Virtue Chastity, and one or two of the musical angels (Fig. 7). These are really lovely compositions.

Agostino does not, as is said of him, sacrifice representation to design, but, instead, he too often sacrifices form to his own heedlessness or indifference, and the design suffers in consequence. For the handling of line and form Agostino and Botticelli invite comparison, and Agostino's sacrifice of representation marks the sharp distinction between the two men. Botticelli sacrifices naturalistic anatomy and canons, but the forms he presents are beautiful according to his own canons, beautiful in delicate, thoughtful rhythm. Botticelli's people belong to a rarified other-world. Agostino's belong, possibly, to a half-demonic one, and these strange-featured, capricious-looking beings with their languid half-closed eyes, half-sensuous mouths, poorly drawn hands and feet, and rather bizarre garments often repel. Michel¹ speaks truly when he characterizes Agostino as "a less resourceful Gozzoli, a less intense and less profound Botticelli, with a tenderness a little superficial, a grace voluptuous and mannered, with a singular and disconcerting mingling of ephemeral spontaneity, archaism, and cunning." Remembering that Agostino flourished in the best period of Florentine art, when both sculptors and painters were absorbed in the perfecting of form, are we, then, to regard his work as frankly and affectedly archaistic or merely inexpert, or does it, indeed, carry with it the suggestion of haste and bored indifference? There is never this note of carelessness or indifference in Botticelli's work; his interest in his problem amounts to genuine imaginative obsession. One feels, too, with Agostino, as never with Botticelli, the dangers of the erratic curve; it is only in being a rather safely obscure Quattrocentist that Agostino is saved from being a warning in the schools of design.

For comparison, one might also turn to the early Renaissance in France, and find in the work of Jean Goujon a possible analogy to Agostino's management of drapery. Both suggest the same ancient source, and the Neo-Attic swirl is in the work of both, but there the comparison ends, for with Goujon realism of form, while never over-emphasized or insisted upon, is never uselessly ignored. A graciousness of form, as well as of spirit, present in

¹ Michel, IV, 1, p. 94.

Goujon's is missing in Agostino's work. Agostino underestimates the value of distinguished form.

In every plausible comparison to be suggested, Agostino di Duccio suffers, but the unique quality of his decorative effects will always save him from neglect and his lyric quality will never cease to capture. His work remains a lure to the imagination, interesting, exotic, unorthodox, and full of unexplainable charm.

III

Jacopo della Quercia, Ghiberti, Donatello, Luca della Robbia, with their various preoccupations, as we have seen, make on early Renaissance sculpture each his peculiar and valuable impress. Form infused with thought is the fixed idea of both Della Quercia and Donatello. The contribution of the other two, and of Agostino di Duccio, is in the way of decoration. Another group of sculptors, following a little later in the Quattrocento, effective in their work, but not exerting the same influence on art in general, stands forth as frankly decorative in purpose. Knowledge of form has been gloriously achieved by the great initiators; the artists of the generation closely following have only to absorb and apply the principles, and they do this in many cases with high distinction.

BERNARDO ROSSELLINO, earliest of this second group, makes definite impression on Quattrocento work in his monument to Lionardo Bruni¹ in Santa Croce, and departing from the mediaeval sepulchral idea, sets the type of Renaissance tomb. The Bruni tomb as a Renaissance monument shows classical influence in its larger divisions, in its charming details, and in its effigy of antique grandeur. The monument is splendidly architectural in its lines and proportions; symmetry, focus, relation of parts, and subordination of ornament are in no way neglected in the perfection of its composition. A classical tomb worthy of a great humanist, it betrays no Christian element save the dignified and impressive Madonna of the tympanum.

With flexibility of artistic gift, Bernardo creates in wholly another spirit the tomb of Beata Villana de' Cerchi (Fig. 8) in Santa Maria Novella. This is one of a group of famous tombs in various parts of Italy raised to women of distinguished houses of the

¹ Michel, IV, 1, fig. 70.

period.¹ All show Renaissance spirit or details with some lingering mediaeval quality. The Cerchi monument comes near to the Carretto in charm, but the figure of La Beata is a little less monumental than that of Ilaria: the lines of the Villana effigy, though charming are not so decoratively significant, and the posture lacks that old mediaeval quality of eternal rest, giving rather the effect of an uncertain sleep, a note distinctly new with Renaissance sculpture. There is, however, in the figure of Villana more of mediaeval detachment and restraint than of Renais-

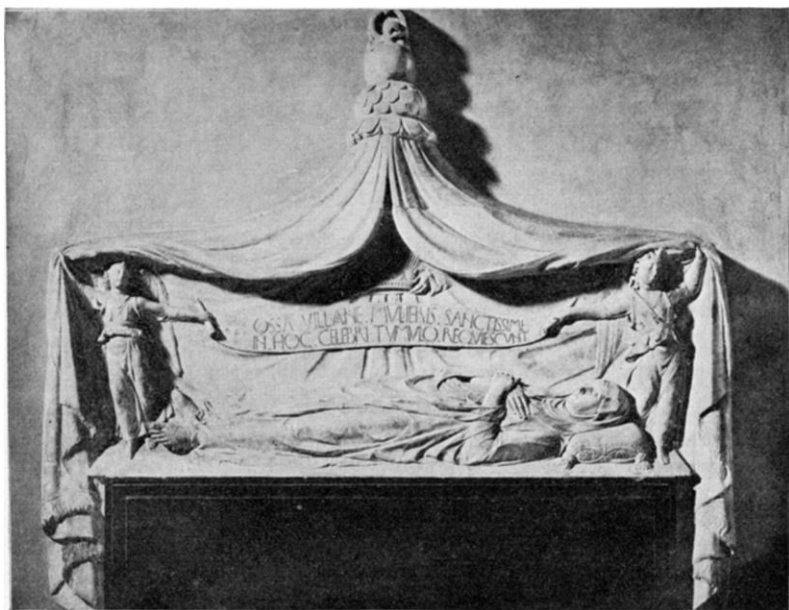


FIGURE 8.—TOMB OF LA BEATA VILLANA BY B. ROSSELLINO: SANTA MARIA NOVELLA, FLORENCE.

sance realism, and the monument, in general effect and feeling, belongs rather to the Middle Ages than to the Renaissance: the inspiration comes from the fourteenth century tomb. The traditional theme of angels drawing aside a curtain in front of the effigy is here delightfully handled, and the scroll which the angels unroll gives with its fine inscription a note of delicate accent. Bernardo again, with his keen sense of design, com-

¹ The list of these tombs, beginning with that of Ilaria del Carretto, includes such names as Barbara Manfredi, Maria Camponeschi, Maria of Aragon, Medea Colleoni, etc.

poses in line, shadows, and subtle contrasts. Architectural feeling is dominant in all of Bernardo's work, not only in his many tombs, but also in such reliefs as the Madonna of Arezzo, with its perpendicular lines and hieratic composition. Sculpture is, in fact, always secondary with Bernardo, and architecture claims him more and more.

ANTONIO ROSSELLINO, although he collaborated often with Bernardo, lacks in a measure the fine architectural sense of his older brother. The most famous work connected with Antonio's name happens unfortunately to be an architectural monument, the tomb of the young cardinal of Portugal,¹ in San Miniato, a work in which Antonio breaks many of the rules of design. It lacks, to begin with, the strong boundary lines of an architectural framework. The thinly disposed curtain which is substituted takes the place neither of legitimate architecture nor of mediaeval drapery. Absence of organic unity, again, disturbs the whole effect; there is no rightly focused centre of interest, for the effigy is not stressed as the dominant motif and, with interest diffused, the different elements fall loosely apart. The monument, failing thus in cohesiveness, fails also in harmony, for the several groups of angels and putti² show little correspondence of type, pose, or costume. They flutter about at various angles, and their animation but adds to the confusion. Great satisfaction, however, is afforded by the wonderfully beautiful figure of the young cardinal, with its absolute repose, and its simple, straight, and harmonious lines. In spite of the fact, then, that this monument disregards the laws of harmony and order, in spite of the rather disturbing little angels which obtrude restlessly overhead, this tomb shows in the fine effigy and in details of lovely carved ornament, much of the beauty and grace of the best Quattrocento work.

If one misses in this tomb of Antonio the best architectural feeling, one cannot deny him fine decorative tact in smaller works. In the latter he combines with an unusual facility for form and composition a taste for line and delicacy of finish which marvelously enhance the final charm. The tondo of the Madonna Adoring the Child³ in the Bargello is a good example of Antonio's

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 414.

² This fluttering, over-active putto foreshadows the excessive and wearisome occurrence of the motif in the sixteenth century and later.

³ Venturi, VI, fig. 418.

harmonious composition in purely sculptural works, and may be noted in passing as one of the first attempts in marble at pictorial relief. The Nativity,¹ in the Church of Monte Oliveto, Naples, shows the same good understanding of composition, of pictorial relief, and of the decorative possibilities of details. The motif of dancing angels over the manger is a charming accessory. In the Madonna of the Mandorla, in Santa Croce, the tendency of art at the end of the Quattrocento towards ample form and mundane expression begins to intrude itself, but, like the Bargello tondo, this Madonna shows Antonio's delicate feeling for finish. In all of Antonio's Madonnas there is an ever present grace which makes them very appealing.² Even in Antonio's least successful work one can forgive much for the sake of the beautiful ornamental detail in which he and Desiderio, with a sure sense, never failed.

The pupil of Donatello, DESIDERIO DA SETTIGNANO, inherited the technical skill, but not the passionate quality of his great master. The knowledge of form he learns, but is incapable of Donatello's realism, or of his dramatic intensity. With an idealizing tendency, selective and eliminative, with an exquisite sensitiveness for line and finish, Desiderio becomes the interpreter of the aristocratic temperament, whether his subject be tomb, Madonna, Infant John, or Unknown Lady.

With the versatility of Quattrocento genius Desiderio adds to his rather specialized sculptural gifts keen architectural judgment. The Marsuppini tomb³ in Santa Croce, interesting pendant to the Bruni monument, shows almost the same distinction as the latter. Desiderio's accomplishment is barely less than Bernardo's, but Desiderio had, of course, only to follow. Desiderio adopts all the main features of the Bruni tomb, on a scale, perhaps, not quite so perfect, but the feeling for the essentials of composition is equally present in both. The two monuments, however, show contrast in the point of view. The desire to lighten the effect, combined with fondness for ornament, asserts itself strongly in the work of Desiderio, and every opportunity has been seized to secure an effect less heavy and sombre than that of the Bruni tomb. The background to the Marsuppini

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 417.

² The Kneeling Virgin of the Presepio, Metropolitan Museum, New York, is attributed to Antonio and, whether by him or not, is a very charming work of this period.

³ Venturi, VI, fig. 266. Michel, IV, 1, fig. 79.

effigy is broken up into more slender panels, gloomy recesses are hidden, merry putti appear, the sarcophagus is of richly ornate type, and the figure of the dead prelate is represented as if in natural sleep. Floral wreaths and vases and singing figures, light and delicate ornamentation take the place of the sober and

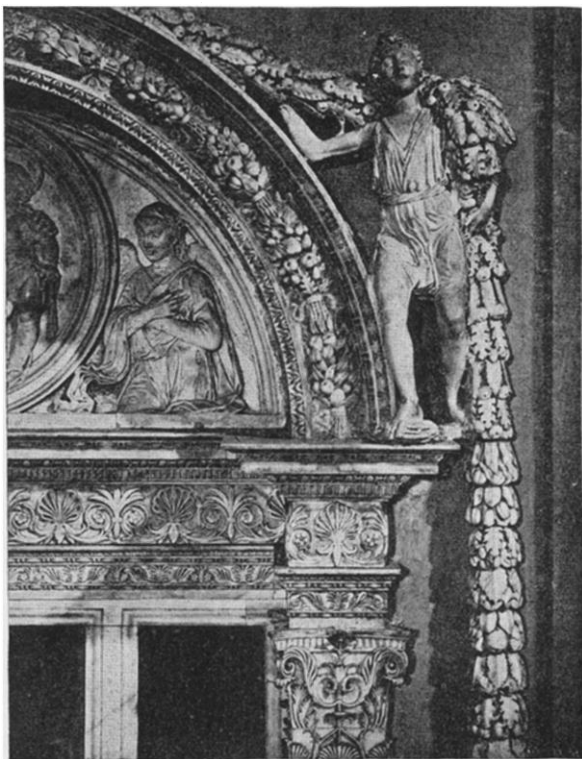


FIGURE 9.—WREATH-BEARER, MARSUPPINI TOMB, BY DESIDERIO: SANTA CROCE, FLORENCE,

severe elegance of the Bruni monument. In the Marsuppini tomb restrained but light elegance is seen in every part (Fig. 9).

Desiderio's purely sculptural work falls notably into three classes: Madonna reliefs, studies of childhood, feminine portrait busts. Around all of these the sharp controversy of attribution has been waged.

Of the studies of childhood, the so-called Christ-child and Young John,¹ of the Arconati-Visconti collection, Paris, once attributed

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 272.

to Donatello, and of the Madonna reliefs the Panciatichi, Florence (Fig. 10), best exemplify the qualities already specified: everywhere delicacy of touch and the designer's point of view, subtle surface pattern in sensitive line, a human note and aristocratic aloofness subtly combined, unerring taste in the great art of selection. Finally, in most of Desiderio's work there is the lyric joy of life which makes instant the appeal. The Madonna of the Dreyfus collection, Paris, and the Turin Madonna, now safely ascribed to Desiderio, as well as the Madonna in the



FIGURE 10.—MADONNA PANCIATICHİ BY DESIDERIO.

tympanum of the Marsuppini tomb, also illustrate these points in greater or less degree.

The feminine portrait busts of this period constitute one of the fascinating problems in attribution; whoever the artist may be in the case of each, they are closely related to Desiderio's work in gracious quality and aristocratic spirit (Fig. 11). Though sculpture in the round, they give the impression of drawing in clear, delicate line, and cannot be wholly ignored in a consideration of the decorative elements of the Quattrocento. The long-contested busts of some young Princess of Urbino, of Marietta

Strozzi, of Beatrice—or is she Eleanor?—of Aragon, and others of the same general character, with which the critics play the pleasant Game of Attributions, involving and confusing the illusive names of Desiderio and Francesco Laurana, all illustrate with great distinction the artist's supreme creative tact in the restrained use of exquisite detail,—spared almost to the

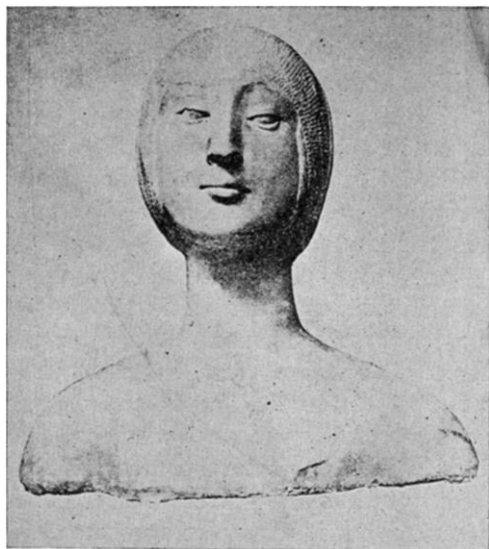


FIGURE 11.—ELEANOR OF ARAGON(?) BY LAURANA: PALERMO.

point of omission,—and the happy balance of idealization and individuality.¹

MINO DA FIESOLE, pupil of Desiderio, follows his master, but never learns his craft. In imitating Desiderio he falls into the

¹ Francesco Laurana, a Dalmatian Italian, adds another name to the list of those whose artistic personalities have not yet been adequately reconstructed. His style is related, by way of certain influences, to that of Quattrocento Florence, but his work is connected not with Florence, but chiefly with Southern Italy, Sicily, and Southern France.

According to present attributions, the so-called young Princess of Urbino, a young Marietta Strozzi, Berlin, and a young Marietta Strozzi, in private ownership, Florence, are now given to Desiderio, while the Beatrice, or Eleanor, busts are gathered under the personality of Laurana. This latter group includes: a bust in Vienna, one in the Louvre, one in the André collection, Paris (which may be a forgery, or by an imitator), a young Beatrice in the Dreyfus collection, Paris, an older Beatrice in Berlin, and the finest one of all in Palermo. For illustrations see Venturi, VI, figs. 274, 275, 711, 712, and others.

fault of most imitators, that of exaggeration or distortion of fine qualities into caricature. Desiderio's fineness of touch and discrimination are often translated by Mino into the mincing. Mino's figures, in general, show poor drawing and proportions, defective modeling, and poverty of substance; his lack of scale appears unpleasantly in the figures of the indoor pulpit of the Prato Cathedral. Probably Mino's worst failing, however, is lack of grand seriousness and sense of fitness. Desiderio's light touch goes with keen insight; Mino's lightness is a cumbersome sportiveness, which knows neither time nor place, a superficial attempt at playfulness, which comes from a superficial point of view or want of a wise and understanding spirit. Here and there Mino draws an inspired line, and it is as linealist that he counts, if at all, in a decorative way. The defect in the spirit of his work and his limited technical achievement do not, indeed, obscure such isolated good qualities as delicate line, graceful architectural ornament, and facility in rendering textile materials. Mino does, in fact, show taste for surface pattern, but, relying on richly embroidered robes for decorative effect, he too often accomplishes mere ostentation of costume. The ingenuous sweetness and gentle charm of some of Mino's figures should not be overlooked, but, not combined with more forceful characteristics, they hardly redeem his work from ineffectiveness. Sometimes Mino's work is genuinely pleasing, but it seldom escapes the obvious and the superficial.

Flourishing in the second half of the fifteenth century, and classified as extreme realists, with all this implies, Pollajuolo and Verrocchio might legitimately be omitted here were it not for the fact that, with all their intense preoccupation with realistic form, each shows in flashes the perfected decorative sense of the Quattrocento.

The work which preëminently argues this in the case of ANTONIO POLLAJUOLO is the bust of the splendid young warrior,¹ attributed to him, in the Bargello. In the whole pose and treatment decorative feeling is clearly defined: one feels it in the tilt of the head, in the treatment of the hair, in the impersonal, cryptic expression of the face. One sees it in the contrast between the general simplicity of the figure and the detailed ornament of the breastplate, as well as in the pattern of the breastplate itself, which is covered in low relief with vigorously moving little figures

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 497.

illustrating some classic theme. The whole thing in its harmony of parts is an unerring piece of decorative work, more truly decorative, in fact, than Pollajuolo's more pretentious efforts, which are too apt to be merely elaborate studies of anatomy, of posture, and of allegory.¹

With VERROCCHIO comes the culmination of realism in Florence. Verrocchio is among the first of the Italian sculptors to present scenes from actual life, and in the tomb relief of Francesca Tornabuoni,² now in the Bargello, he represents a deathbed scene not



FIGURE 12.—BUST OF UNKNOWN WOMAN BY VERROCCHIO: FLORENCE.

only disagreeable as realism, but also lacking in decorative effect; it seems a piece of decorative arrogance, in truth, and something of an anomaly in the light of the Florentine precedent for fine decorative taste. Clearly it is not in the Tornabuoni relief that one looks for the decorative power of Verrocchio, but one finds it to a marked extent in the two Madonnas of the Bargello.³ In

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 493.

² Venturi, VI, fig. 482.

³ These are a terra-cotta relief, authenticated as the work of Verrocchio, and a very similar marble relief, almost equally assured in attribution. See Venturi, VI, figs. 483, 484.

these reliefs Verrocchio departs far from the Donatello Madonna in many ways; Verrocchio's Madonnas have the majesty of Donatello's with more restraint and detachment. They have the aristocratic quality of Desiderio's, with more real existence; they have the sanity and poise of Luca's. The treatment of the drapery in the marble relief is interesting in rhythmical, crisp line. That which prevents entire harmony in this composition is the over-realism in the modeling of the baby compared with the more generalized treatment of the Madonna.

The most surely authentic of the portrait busts attributed to Verrocchio is that of the Unknown Lady, in the Bargello (Fig. 12). Though sculpture in the round, it possesses, like Desiderio's, the decorative feeling of relief. It is decorative in its purity of line, in its simplicity of pose, in the rare perfection of its finish, in the contrast between exquisite detail and delicate plain surfaces. The detail occurs in three small areas—in the roll of hair, or kind of headdress, pushed out on either side of the head, and in the bunch of flowers which the lady holds with both exquisite hands in front of her. The hair, or headdress, repeats the pattern of the flowers; they are detailed to the same scale and both give exactly the right accent. The charm is not entirely obvious, nor the appeal immediate, perhaps, but upon reflection she becomes a rare figure of rhythm and harmony,—this *Inconnue*,—let us leave the Quattrocento with her.

With BENEDETTO DA MAJANO and MATTEO CIVITALI we approach the new century; these men mark the transition. Certain characteristics appearing slightly in Antonio Rossellino find more developed expression in Benedetto and Matteo. Amplitude of form and drapery begins to be a feature in Renaissance sculpture, and along with it appears increasing concern for sculpture in the round, less concern for sculpture in relief. As a logical result, interest shifts from composition and line to mere representation and to over-emphasis of form. Ever-growing influence from the classical nude leads to direct imitation of the antique, without the inspiration of the early Renaissance. Pose becomes mannered, facial expression either theatrical in attempted portrayal of emotion, or emptily passive; and sixteenth century passivity is far indeed from the grandly impersonal repose of early work. The freshness of the early Renaissance is gone, and the early Quattrocento sense of beauty is dying out, but sixteenth century characteristics are not yet fully matured. Matteo and Benedetto show

the initial tendencies of the decadence, but not its worst phases. Their work is uneven; both command some technical skill and are not lacking in knowledge of composition. The statue of Faith,¹ in the Bargello, illustrates, for Civitali, the trend of the day: meaningless allegory, amplitude of figure and drapery, with empty expression and somewhat mannered pose. It is a statue of mediocre interest, but Civitali is seen even to less advantage in the monument to Saint Regulus² in Lucca Cathedral. He is seen at his best in the Annunciation³ in the Lucca Pinacoteca, and in the really charming little Angels of the Sacrament,⁴ in the Lucca Cathedral. Here and there one comes upon very pleasing little angels ascribed to his hand. Benedetto's well-known pulpit,⁵ in Santa Croce, Florence, reveals, in five scenes from the life of St. Francis, some sureness in execution, some ease in composition, but likewise the new taste for rather dry and over-abundant ornament which leaves no moulding free for line and accent.

Consideration of Quattrocento relief can hardly be concluded without brief reference to the Pure Ornament which, in the Renaissance, presents such rare development. Just as the sculptors of the Renaissance turn to classic art for inspiration in their larger work, so, for ornamental detail, they borrow from the Roman, though that is not their only source: the mediaeval, too, is a rich storehouse of decorative material. The Renaissance, thus, mingles many motives, but what it borrows it transforms, and with it creates characteristic types of ornament in every part of Italy: Lombardy, Venice, Rome, Tuscany, Florence, each evolves an ornament full of grace and charm, and each sculptor has his favorite mode of ornament in connection with his larger sculpture. Della Quercia makes Ilaria's tomb classic with garland and putto. Ghiberti⁶ binds foliage with ribbons, interspersing birds and small animals in a delightful way; he makes use, too, of little classic heads, of figures in niches, and of graceful floating angels bearing wreaths. Luca develops the decorative angel with more originality than Ghiberti, and uses it constantly. Glazed terracotta foliage

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 474.

² Venturi, VI, figs. 478, 479.

³ Venturi, VI, fig. 471.

⁴ Venturi, VI, figs. 472-473.

⁵ Venturi, VI, fig. 462.

⁶ Venturi, VI, figs. 86-89.

with Tuscan wild flowers is, of course, Luca's special contribution to Quattrocento ornament. Agostino di Duccio employs putti and garlands and the Malatesta rose with fine effect. Always inventive, Donatello is not invariably successful in his ornament, for his decorative sense is by no means unfailing; he does not thoroughly understand the subordination of ornament to the scheme of his larger compositions, nor does he entirely grasp the relationship of ornament to decoration in general. It is the understanding of this last important fact that gives some of the minor men their distinction (Fig. 13).

About the middle of the Quattrocento, Florentine ornament, crystalizing into a type, and used by a whole group of workers, becomes a happy association of flowers, fruits, fanciful animals, and winged figures, in wreath, garland, or arabesque, all carved



FIGURE 13.—TUSCAN RENAISSANCE ORNAMENT: DETAIL.

with classic rhythm of line and graceful imagery. Mino,¹ Desiderio, Antonio Rossellino, and others, use this kind of ornament with facility and beauty. Pollajuolo abandons the type. Verrocchio develops the baroque in its initial stages. With Benedetto, as indicated, ornament becomes dry and loses its freshness. Ornament follows, in the main, the same course as sculpture proper, developing from restrained, fresh, early phases to an efflorescent end. Even at its poorest, ornament may furnish an illuminating field of interest to the historian or archaeologist; while at its best, it offers inspiration to the artistic imagination, and fascinating matter for the study of design.

In the course of this brief survey, decorative qualities in sculpture have been more or less defined, and the occurrence of these qualities in Italian work has, here and there, been noted. A

¹ Venturi, VI, fig. 442.

rapid summary may be made. After the passing of ancient art, —of Egyptian skill in line and Assyrian taste for surface pattern, —classic art begins a development from an entirely new point of view, at first, however, with the decorative idea still predominating. From the earliest groping of Greek sculpture for form, ease in naturalistic expression develops rapidly, and the two fundamental ideas are fused in the golden age of Greek art. Form develops further until, in the Hellenistic period with its over-stress on realism, genuine decorative effect is largely ignored, and the fact indicated above finds apt illustration: as interest in realism increases beyond a certain limit, sculpture becomes negligible as decoration. The Roman period borrows freely from Greek art, but develops its original types too. The decorative idea is present slightly in Roman historical and continuous relief, but very richly in pure ornament. Following this epoch, the tradition for classic form is almost lost amid the chaos of the Middle Ages, and, with many strains mingling, oriental as well as European, sculpture becomes sculpture in relief: decorative, associative, architectural. Art swings, thus, from the one fundamental idea to the other. Only once or twice during the centuries surveyed have the two ideas been fused.

The Renaissance absorbs the past, taking over motifs and ideas with creative imagination. Interest in form revives and focuses on the human figure as the greatest possibility in art. Perfection of form, having classic precedent, is realized quickly and brilliantly, but decoration, having become during the mediaeval centuries almost intuitive, is not at once forgotten. Not until the sixteenth century does decorative feeling approach extinction, when Michel Angelo with his great genius makes of sculpture a mighty figure-language, and his followers produce anatomical allegory, or decadent imitation of Michel Angelo and of classic types. Fusion of the two ruling conceptions of sculpture, even in the first freshness of the Quattrocento, is seldom accomplished, and Quattrocento relief comes before us as a subtle study of successes and failures.

The greatest masters sometimes fail, but are often vital even in their failures. A number of the lesser men experience inspired moments. With enlightened deduction as to cause and effect, one can only repeat that form needs the decorative spirit to give it orderly and harmonious expression; that decoration demands

knowledge of form to give it force and distinction. Only a perfect balance of the two principles, the representative and the decorative, can achieve the perfect art of a Parthenon Frieze, or a doorway of Chartres; can give us a tomb of Ilaria del Carretto, or a portrait bust of the Italian Quattrocento.

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